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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to present an analysis of the functions of education from a broad social, economic, and political perspective, and to derive from this analysis suggestions for a political strategy which teachers may pursue in efforts to promote an egalitarian, democratic social order. Provided in the analysis are summaries of conclusions reached over the years by many observers and critics of society in general, and of education in particular. A list of recommended readings is supplied. (Author/RM)

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ON SYSTEMIC CONSTRAINTS AND RADICAL PRAXIS IN EDUCATION

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The purpose of this essay is to present an analysis of the functions of education from a broad social, economic, and political perspective, and to derive from this analysis suggestions for a political strategy which teachers may pursue in efforts to promote an egalitarian, democratic social order. The analysis summarizes conclusions reached over the years by many observers and critics of society in general, and of education in particular.

One major source of misunderstanding the nature and dynamics of social institutions such as education, religion, economy, etc., is that they tend to be studied and interpreted by "insiders" whose perspective is likely to be too narrow and affected by vested interests. Students of social institutions are gradually realizing that in order to fully comprehend any specific institution one needs to study its interactions with the total societal context in addition to exploring its internal dynamics. We have come by now to accept that the economy and defense are too important to our existence to be left in the hands of professional economists and soldiers. The same logic seems to apply to the study and interpretation of education.

Teachers, when examining their profession, tend to be concerned primarily with aspects of the educational process which involve interaction with individual students or groups of students. Their orientation to educational processes is atomistic, and they lose sight of the aggregate function, dynamics, and outcomes of education as a social institution. They are aware, so to speak, of single trees but have no sense of the forest. This atomistic orientation may, however, have its own social function. It enables teachers to maintain their sanity by holding on to the illusion that they are engaged in the meaningful activity of furthering the fullest possible development of their own students. Were they fully conscious of the naked truth concerning the aggregate outcome of education, they probably could

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not carry on, for that truth flies in the face of their cherished notions concerning the nature of the educational process.

What, then, is that naked truth and on what evidence is it based? Macro-level analysis of the aggregate output of the educational enterprise in any society, at any time, reveals that irrespective of the efforts and capacities of individual teachers and students, and irrespective of what actually goes on in individual schools, be they "progressive" or "conservative", "free" or "public", any generation of students will fill at the termination of its formal education the array of "work" and "non-work" positions existing in society, whatever the nature of this array may be. The educational process then constitutes one of society's principal mechanisms for reproducing the prevailing social division of labor by sorting out, preparing, and channelling generation after generation of students into the prevailing work organization. Consequently, what educational systems produce in the aggregate is determined ultimately by the prevailing modes of production, consumption, distribution, and work organization of a society rather than by what educators like to call the philosophy, values, methods, content, structure, and procedures of the educational system. Closer analysis reveals, of course, that the philosophy, values, methods, content, structure and procedures of educational systems are not independently designed by philosophers of education and by Schools of Education, but are constantly shaped and reshaped by the changing modes of production, consumption, distribution, and work organization of society, and by the value premises and ideology implicit in these modes and organization. Hence, significant changes of important aspects of education cannot be evolved independently within the educational system. The only effective way to obtain such changes is by restructuring the modes of production, consumption, distribution and work organization. The educational process will then change almost automatically by generating the necessary modifications or "educational reforms" to assure the fit between its output and the demands of the restructured modes of production, consumption, distribution and work organization. In the simplest possible terms then, it is the social context

which determines the nature, dynamics, and outcome of the educational process. Formal education as an institutionalized social process reproduces the social context but does not change it.

Educators throughout history have tended to disregard the foregoing causal relations and have pursued the illusion of educational omnipotence, hoping, in spite of consistent evidence to the contrary, that if they only improved their methods they could change the prevailing social order. Siegfried Bernfeld, a well known socialist educator, unravelled the futility of these illusions of the educational profession in an insightful essay entitled, quite appropriately, "Sisyphos - or the Limits of Education" *.

The general proposition that the educational system of a society in its entirety reproduces the prevailing social order and its corresponding division of labor requires, of course, many additional specific propositions if the educational process is to be fully comprehended. Space limitations preclude here such a complete analysis. However, it should at least be noted that the general function of an educational system as a whole, namely the reproduction of the total social order is usually divided into segmental functions, namely the reproduction of certain definable segments of that order. Hence different units of educational systems are geared to the preparation of specified segments of the next generation. Efficiency in accomplishing the segmentation of a generation of students into specified strata of the social order and the division of labor is, of course, enhanced by such procedures as segregation, tracking, biased testing and grading procedures, ritualistic examinations, certification requirements, etc. Not all differences in educational content and method are, however, meaningless. Some differences are valid in terms of the differential preparatory needs of specific segments of the social order and the division of labor. Yet, it should be noted in this context that the social and economic origins of individual students and of groups of students are known to be no less important determinants of the eventual roles these students will fill in the social order and in the division of labor than differences in their

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* Bernfeld, Siegfried, Sisyphos-oder die Grenzen der Erziehung, Wien: Internationaler Psychoanalitischer Verlag, G.M.B.H., 1925. English translation: Sisyphos Or The Limits Of Education, Berkeley: University of California Press 1973.

school experiences. As a matter of fact, these social and economic characteristics of students tend to be important determinants of the kind of educational experiences to which they will be exposed. Family background thus interacts with specialized educational experiences to reinforce the reproduction of the stratification systems.

A crucial question implicit in the proposition that educational systems are segmented along social class lines is whether by exposing all students to the "best" possible educational experiences (assuming we know from independent sources what "good education" really is), all will attain "good" positions in the division of labor and a correspondingly "good life". Merely spelling out this question reveals its nonsensical nature. Clearly, as long as production and consumption are organized hierarchically and competitively, and as long as profit and exploitation are essential aspects of the social-economic order, some individuals and groups will occupy more desirable positions than others, and some will be left without any positions, even when all were exposed to the same educational experiences. By merely equalizing education without eliminating the hierarchical, alienating, competitive and exploitative social order, and without generating and assuring meaningful and equally rewarded positions for all, education would simply be deprived of the sorting-out and channeling function for the social order, and some other mechanism would be devised to accomplish that function. Some evidence for such a change in function can already be observed as a result of the "open admission" policy of public universities. The more students enter colleges and attain college degrees, and the more diversified their socio-economic backgrounds are, the less important becomes the possession of college degrees for entry

into desirable positions, and new, arbitrary entry requirements are established. Also, as college attendance is more widely distributed, qualitative standards are reduced in the "non-elite" schools. High School education passed through a similar process of qualitative devaluation several decades ago when school attendance was made compulsory up to age 16 or 18, the result being that an average high school education in 1970 is probably not superior in educational achievement to an average grade school education in the 1920s.

Similar arguments are relevant in relation to current efforts by parent groups, teachers, and schools to "improve" the quality of education in their neighborhood schools through various mechanisms including "free schools", "open schools", "ghetto academies", etc. These efforts have a certain intrinsic validity for oppressed groups in the context of a competitive and exploitative social order. However, the meaning and consequences of this approach in terms of changing the social system as a whole are negligible. The aggregate consequences will obviously be zero as long as the total system remains unchanged. What actually happens is that the children of some groups will become more competitive in the market at the expense of the children of some other groups. Essentially this is merely a game of musical chairs with desirable positions being shifted around, but the ratio of desirable to undesirable positions remaining unchanged. Thus these efforts may reflect the cooptation into the capitalist mentality of additional groups. Also, the intensity of competition and conflict among various deprived minority groups is likely to be intensified along with these efforts as those now accustomed to fill preferred positions are not planning to vacate them. There simply is no magic solution to the demand for social equality by

modifying the educational system, while maintaining the competitive and exploitative social order intact. There can be only new illusions until a society moves to replace that competitive, exploitative order with an egalitarian, democratic one, involving equal social, economic, and political rights and responsibilities for all.

Does the essentially conservative function of educational systems suggest the conclusion that working within such systems is utterly meaningless and futile for teachers committed to the establishment of an egalitarian, democratic society? The answer to this question depends on one's overall views concerning political strategy*. My own position is that in spite of its nature and dynamics, the field of education offers considerable scope for revolutionary praxis provided the results of the foregoing analysis are taken into consideration, and the implicit limits of education as a formal social institution are not disregarded. In order to clarify this apparently paradox position the analysis of the function of education has to be pursued a bit further. Such an exploration reveals that education does not merely reproduce the social order and its division of labor. It also transmits from generation to generation, and it inculcates the young with, the value premises, ideology, and consciousness which assure "voluntary" adaptation and conformity to, uncritical acceptance of, and emotional loyalty to, the

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* For some general observations on strategy, see my essay: Some Thoughts on Political Strategy, distributed at the Second National Convention of NAM, (July 1973), and the Epilogue in my book Unravelling Social Policy, Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1973.

established social order, on the part of a significant majority of the population, irrespective of the nature and quality of that order and of the extent to which it actually meets the existential needs of its members. The dominant consciousness of a population is, of course, a major source of stability of any social order, and hence it is not surprising that the educational system, the primary function of which is the reproduction of the established social order, has a complementary function, namely, the transmission of the kind of consciousness which emanates from, reflects, and assures the continuity and stability of, that order. Nor is it surprising that the educational process tends to inhibit the development of those human capacities by which individuals may question and challenge the dominant consciousness of their society. Hence education tends to stifle the natural curiosity of students, their urge for critical questioning and analysis of reality, their free intellectual development and creativity, and their impulse toward self-assertion. It should be noted that education achieves these results primarily through the total experience and the structure and quality of human relations to which students are exposed, and only marginally through the cognitive content of teaching. Consciousness is absorbed, to a considerable extent, directly from the educational environment rather than through communication of specific intellectual content. The latter merely supplements the attitudes and orientations which are communicated through the "vibrations" of the system. It should also be noted that formal education is not the only source of consciousness transmission and reinforcement. The family, the neighborhood, the peer group, the church, the media of communication and entertainment, signals from business and government spokesmen, etc., all participate in massive continuous efforts of generating an all-

pervasive common consciousness supportive of the status quo and hostile to any questioning of the prevailing order.

Yet, just because of the crucial importance of consciousness for the stability and perpetuation of any social order, it also happens to be the Achilles heel of all oppressive and exploitative social orders, and hence a preferred focus for revolutionary praxis. If a revolutionary movement could enable sufficiently large segments of a population to liberate themselves from the distorted consciousness with which they were inculcated, and to achieve, by raising their consciousness, a more accurate comprehension of the oppressive aspects of their social reality, then the people could use their newly gained insights to organize movements for their own liberation, and to transform an existing exploitative into an egalitarian, democratic social order.

This far too brief, schematic sketch of revolutionary dynamics brings us back to the role of teachers in this process. It seems, on the basis of our analysis, that individual teachers simply cannot expect to change the primary function of an educational system, the reproduction of the existing social division of labor. However, they can, individually, and as a growing movement, aim to subvert the conventional processes of reproducing the dominant societal consciousness. This can be done systematically by appropriately restructuring the experiences of students in classrooms, and by changing the nature and quality of teacher-student, and teacher-parent relations, as well as by suitably modifying cognitive and intellectual interactions with students, parents, and colleagues. In this manner they can use the educational process toward liberating

rather than thwarting the minds of students, to further their capacity for critical thought, and to stimulate thus the emergence of a counter-consciousness.

No doubt this kind of educational praxis is not easy to develop in current school environments, nor is such praxis free from personal risks. It requires imagination, tact, and conviction on the part of teachers and also a large measure of understanding and tolerance for the opinions of colleagues, parents, students, and administrators, who have not yet extricated themselves from the dominant consciousness. It is important to forego "movement jargon", code words, and slogans, and to communicate in a style and manner calculated to reach those who do not accept a radical position. Provocative behavior and language are clearly contraindicated, for the purpose of radical praxis should be not to get one's self expelled from the system, but to stay within it, and become a focal point of a counter definition right inside the system. We must remember that we do not aim to communicate only with those who already agree with us but to reach and challenge the consciousness of the vast majority who have not reached our insights. Obviously, we must talk in their language and use concepts they are familiar with and committed to.

These brief comments on radical praxis merely suggest principles which require elaboration and testing through actual educational practice. Yet the purpose of this essay was mainly to suggest a theoretical basis for politically conscious praxis in education. Using this theoretical basis, individual teachers need to develop their own classroom style and content so as to further the growth of critical consciousness among their students, the students' parents, and colleagues. By joining with other colleagues in a democratic, socialistic

movement they can accelerate the development of theory and practice of counter education, and draw support from each other in their lonely and at times frustrating work. Developing such an organized movement of like-minded teachers will also enhance their ability to protect themselves against ostracism and hostility from unconvinced colleagues, and against repressive measures which powerful institutions are likely to use against teachers pursuing the course advocated here.

September 6, 1973.

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